

INDIANA YARD WASTE SOLUTIONS

Public Education: The Difference Between Success and Failure

Identifying and Knowing Your Audience

Know Your Business

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Most yard waste management programs will be developed with the involvement of local units of government and in particular, the solid waste districts. In the past, local government has not been required to provide strong public education in order to convince residents to take advantage of their services. Police protection, fire protection, utilities and trash collection are services which are required by residents. Residents do not need to be convinced to use these services. Compliance with these programs is generally obtained through ordinances or regulations.

However, recycling has created public education challenges for local government. Recycling programs require the transmission of significant amounts of information to residents in order to secure participation. Both mandatory and voluntary recycling programs have been implemented throughout the United States with wide variation in success rates. When successful programs are studied, one factor that stands out is that these successful programs generally have aggressive, well-conceived public education programs. While the specific yard waste management methods utilized will vary between communities in Indiana, the development and implementation of an effective public education program will be critical to each community's success.

Effective public education is developed through a realistic appraisal of the situation at hand, an understanding of the political side of the issue and a knowledge of the processes through which people learn.

The key factor in development and implementation of an effective public education program is the clear establishment of the value of the program to the public. If the public clearly understands and believes in the value of the yard waste program, they will make the appropriate decisions to support and participate in the program. A yard waste management program is in reality a product that must be sold to the public. By applying basic marketing techniques to the development of a public education program for a yard waste management program, the public can be convinced to support and participate in these programs.

The following discussion will introduce an approach to the development of a public education program. The use of additional in-depth marketing and educational references during the formation of specific programs is also encouraged.

Identifying and Knowing Your Audience

The first step in the development of a public education program is to identify the audience and to determine what information they need in order to be convinced of the value of the recycling program. In a recycling program there are generally three distinct audiences, each with different informational needs. When developing educational materials, it is important to know the level of

expertise of your audience and the limitations upon them. The education program must take the factors into account and be tailored for the desired segment of the community.

Certain **local elected officials** must allocate funds for the program and may be required to develop legislation needed to implement the program. The **media** will require different information in order to report on the programs. And finally, the **general public** will require specific information regarding why and how they should participate. Each of these audiences has unique informational needs related to its responsibility and its role in the program. The level of detail, the scope, and the method of presentation best suited to each group must be determined. With this preplanning, a message can be carefully prepared for each group giving it exactly the information that it needs.

The general public must understand that their participation in a program is important and that the operator of the program recognizes and appreciates that participation. Many times the public is supportive of yard waste minimization but do not know what they can do to help. The general public must also receive specific and clear instructions regarding what they need to do to participate in the program.

Local elected officials will be program participants and in as much will need to receive the same information which is transmitted to the general public. However, as the party responsible for voting on the various funding needs of the program, these officials need additional information. They must have detailed information that will allow them to answer questions during public debate upon the issues. Elected officials place a high value on openness and thorough preparation on the part of the professionals who are developing and implementing the programs.

The media sees itself as a watchdog of government. The media also values openness and preparation. The media should receive complete information presented in a format that is clear and easily understood. Remember if the information which is given to the media is not clear and understandable, the media will attempt, on their own, to clarify these complex issues.

The special needs of the local elected officials and the media should be given a great deal of attention. A clear understanding of the issues involved by the elected officials and the media from the beginning of the program will make implementation of the program smoother in the long run. When developing a program such as a yard waste composting site, site visits can be invaluable. The issues surrounding such a site are not always well understood by elected officials and the media. During site visits, they can gain a clearer understanding of these issues. A list of operating yard waste composting sites is available on the Office of Land Quality's web site at http://www.IN.gov/ldem/land/permits/lists/registered_composter_list.pdf.

Know Your Business

Once the audience has been **defined, it is time to begin** to develop the message that will be presented. It is absolutely essential that the program planners know and understand the program that they are attempting to implement. If, for example, home composting is being encouraged, the planners must **understand all the** procedures involved in home composting. A pilot or demonstration program could be set up to gather facts on operations, costs, or other important factors. Only after the details and specifics for the program have been well thought out should the program be presented.

Both the advantages and disadvantages of a program must be presented to the audience. Today's audience is far more knowledgeable regarding environmental issues than the audiences of just a few years ago. Remember, if the positive side is the only side presented, the public, the media or the elected officials will locate and present the negatives. Openly recognizing the problems and making a case for well-devised solutions to these problems increases credibility with the audience. Glossing over negatives often leaves the impression that the decision-making ability of the audience is not respected or that the program is not very well thought-out.

For example, home composting should not be promoted by suggesting that homeowners will never have problems with the home composter. Residents may not have enough yard space, may think the compost pile will be unattractive, do not have enough technical information on composting, or may not have the funds or the interest to home compost.

Some of these limitations can be addressed by the program while others cannot be addressed. For example, if funding is a major problem, the community could offer low-cost or free backyard compost bins, in addition to instructions on how to use them properly. Or citizens could be offered free or low-cost compost maintenance tools, which are used to aerate compost piles without the physical work of actually turning the pile. Technical assistance to homeowners could be provided by a hotline or other mechanism.

In addition to providing the entire picture of the program, the program must be presented in a clear and understandable format. In addition, the message must be repeated in a variety of ways. A basic marketing principle is that people remember 20% of what they hear, 30% of what they see and 50% of what they see and hear. Based on this principle, the message must be presented clearly, through a variety of channels, and repeated often.

Establishing a Value for the Program

In order for a yard waste management program to be successful, it is necessary that the general public, the elected officials and the media consider that the programs are valuable to themselves and the community. It is not enough to explain how to participate in the program. Clearly demonstrate that changes in behavior and expenditure of funds (either personal or public) will result in changes which are valuable to the individual.

Public opinion polls show that a significant majority of Americans are concerned about environmental problems. These individuals should be predisposed to participate in yard waste management programs. This might be compared to having the home court advantage in a basketball game. While the home court gives the home team a certain advantage, they are still required to give additional effort to win the game. In the same way, having a significant percentage of the population predisposed to participate in the program is an advantage to developing a successful program. However, the potential participants must believe that there is a valid reason to make the appropriate behavior changes to assure success of the program.

Using generalized environmental benefits will not provide the necessary incentive to most individuals. The benefit must be much more personal. An example of this personalized approach may be taken from the automotive industry. Small, fuel-efficient automobiles are not sold to consumers by advertising that the purchase will help solve global air pollution problems. Rather, they are advertised as a means for the buyer to save money on gasoline purchases. While consumers may get a warm

feeling because they have made a purchase that has a noble purpose, the decision to purchase is often made on a much more individual level (i.e. saving money).

In developing the message that will be used to establish the value of the yard waste program, it is necessary to address the benefits of the program on a local or a personal level.

For example, a program to promote letting grass clippings remain on a lawn could highlight the following personal benefits:

- that the health and appearance of the lawn can be improved;
- that the individual will save time not bagging clippings; or
- that purchased fertilizer requirements can be reduced.

Local community benefits could include:

- precisely calculated avoided disposal tipping fees based on local costs;
- precisely calculated increased life of the local disposal methods; or
- returning some control and responsibility for waste management (i.e., yard wastes) to residents.

The individual who is deciding whether to participate in the program can personally relate to the above benefits and establish the value of the program in understandable terms.

It is also important to establish that while one individual's efforts may seem insignificant, the individual efforts of many residents combined can be significant. For example, Kokomo is a city with 15,600 residences that generate over 20,000 tons of residential solid waste each year. The individual effort of recycling one 40-pound bag of grass clippings hardly seems worthwhile. This example can be expanded to calculate that the resident could recycle 880 pounds of grass clippings, if one bag was recycled every week from May 1 to September 30. Furthermore, if the assumption is made that each of the 15,600 homeowners would take a similar action, a total of 6,864 tons of grass could be diverted from landfilling. Examples such as this which are based on reasonable assumptions and local statistics can be valuable in showing that many individual efforts can make a significant impact and further establish a real value to individual participation in the program.

While these advantages are highlighted, remember to state what problems may arise and how they can be remedied with the least amount of effort.

Presenting the Message

Once the message has been developed to your target audience, it can be distributed in many ways. Some channels that should be considered to reach the media, elected officials and the general public are described below.

Since the elected officials have the responsibility of voting on programs and providing funding, they should be given the information that will enable them to make informed votes. Program specifics can be presented at committee meetings, through program reports or summaries, or by testifying at meetings or hearings.

As programs are approved and move into implementation, it is important to reach as many persons in the general population as possible. The message can be targeted to various groups, based on their degree of community involvement. Local media can be one avenue to reach the public. Use

press conferences to announce milestone events during the implementation of the program. Be sure to write clear concise press releases so that the message is accurately transmitted. The use of advertisements or public service announcements can also spread the message.

Sending educational information to media editors followed by a personal visit or a telephone interview can result in a news article. Offering to write a regular column in the local newspaper can also be effective. Program coordinators participating in local television and radio talk shows, and participating in local "theme events" are other ways to reach the public.

Presentations to civic and other community organizations are a good way to reach a segment of the general population. Send a letter to all such groups offering to speak about a topic which is of major importance to the community. Be sure to prepare an interesting and informative talk when the opportunity to speak arises.

Cooperative Extension services can often provide literature and, in some cases, speakers. For example, the Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service and the Monroe County Master Gardener Association, Inc. conducted free demonstration programs on the subject of Backyard Composting. A master gardener presented the program and a free compost bin was given as a door prize. This program was offered on weekday evenings, to allow for participation of persons with daytime employment. In 1992, ten sessions trained 150 backyard composters. In addition to more sessions for 1993, a demonstration site is planned at the community-recycling center that will show three different residential composting units.

The city of Kokomo's Recycling Programs and the Howard County Extension Office also have cosponsored informative workshops on home composting and lawn management. These workshops were held on Saturday mornings. Although participation was limited, the program is being modified based on attendee comments and will be offered at various times in the spring of 1993. A listing of the Purdue University Cooperative Extension Offices in Indiana can be found at: <http://www.IN.gov/idem/oppta/recycling/organics/programs/puextension.html> . The Extension Service can provide information on the "Master Gardener Program". Gardening clubs can be another source of expertise for composting.

In addition to specific seminars, demonstration exhibits at community centers, events and fairs can spread the word, both by showing techniques and providing take-home literature. Permanent demonstration sites, such as in a park location, school grounds or other public and private locations can also be very effective because they provide long-term educational opportunities. Test plots for bagging and not-bagging grass clippings could show homeowners a comparison, not only of how the lawn may look, but also the savings in grass bagging labor disposal costs, and fertilizer needs.

As another example, a resident having odor problems in their compost pile could compare his pile with that at a permanent demonstration site to determine how to remedy the situation. If the permanent location is not staffed, be sure to have a covered box where take-home literature and a contact phone number can be supplied. Be sure the demonstration project is maintained properly or the public may get an undesirable message.

When educating citizens, it is important to have an easily accessed source of information, so that as residents work on the project, they can have any questions answered quickly. For example, offering a telephone hotline number, especially on spring, summer, and autumn weekends, may be

especially helpful to citizens. Using an easily remembered number may also be helpful, for example, dialing "COM-POST" or "NO-GRASS".

Parade floats and special characters can also be used to spread the word in a more general way. Developing a well thought-out project logo or slogan to include with every piece of promotional or educational materials is an important part of presenting a consistent message.

Specific educational literature can be distributed at libraries, lawn care and equipment sales centers, parks offices, and other appropriate locations. Direct mailings or mailbox stuffings can also be utilized, perhaps in conjunction with related information, such as recycling schedules. In addition, a notice of the collection dates, instructions on how the yard waste should be handled, and where they are to be placed can be done by the following methods:

- Publish a map with designated areas and tentative collection dates based on favorable weather;
- Notify the media about the program by using news releases, news advisories, public service announcements and community calendar announcements. Municipal staff can write articles to be printed in local newspapers and newsletters;
- Distribute information sheets describing the composting project in detail and general information about the rationale and process of composting. This material should be presented in non-technical language that is easily understood. These sheets can be mailed out upon request and can be distributed at community events.
- Develop a poster to publicize the program. (Consider that many stores will not want to display large posters in their windows so it may be wise to print smaller posters);
- In direct mail campaigns, include a brochure with a map and schedule of pickups for each neighborhood. Residents can also be notified in their water and garbage bins;
- Broadcast radio public service announcements giving the locations and operating times of each collection point and;
- Post notices on area streets four to five days prior to collection. (Check whether local laws prohibit posting signs before planning a sign campaign)

Newsletters, bulletins, or other regular publications can feature yard waste options in targeted issues.

Evaluating Educational Efforts

For each method used, it is important to track the success or failure of the method. What kind of response was elicited? Did it reach the audience it was designed for? Was the effort worth its cost, in terms of participation? By evaluating the results of the efforts, it will aid in developing future educational approaches.

One approach is to directly ask participants how they heard about the program that they are participating in. For example, if a hotline or information office is part of the program, the hotline answerer simply keeps a log, based on callers' questions and answers. These caller statistics can be tabulated and used to help evaluate specific educational methods.

Another way is to develop a code of some kind for any brochures that would require a mail-in response. For example, if the program requires a mail-in form to receive a low-cost or free

home-composting bin, use different color forms or one-color forms with different code numbers to match specific types of advertising. The responses could then be tabulated to identify the source from which the requester received the information.

Once fairly successful approaches are discovered, keep doing what works. To expand and build upon a successful promotion, keep the same basic message but with one change. For example, if a brochure is deemed successful, try changing the brochure heading or a new printer style. Compare the results that the changed brochure elicited to that of the original. By utilizing this type of continual testing and modification, promotional materials can be focussed to generate the greatest response, which is participation in the selected program.

Chapter III Bibliography

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